

A RUMOR

Ruth's shiny black bowling ball roared down lane 22 and hooked into the pocket, time and again, as if it were possessed: thunderclaps, pins spinning and scattering to the adjacent lanes. Ruth falling to one knee, pumping her fist in the air and shouting, "YEAH!"

But she picked a bad night to roll a 260 game, substituting for her neighbor Juanita in a league full of strangers, because those strangers were a suspicious batch of old crones, and they started a little worm of a rumor: that the sub on lane 22 with the killer hook and the night's high game was a man. And the rumor grew, turned into an anaconda, and the ladies converged on and confronted Ruth, told her that a panty check was in order unless she wanted her adoptive team to forfeit the three games they'd just won. Ruth's three teammates protested, but became silent when the crowd — shiny bouffants and garish make-up, reeking of cigarettes and beer — pressed in close.

Ruth threw a punch, flattening and splattering blood from a long and formerly thin nose, sending a tumbleweed of a blonde wig rolling down the lane. She decked four more of her attackers before they engulfed her, dragged her to the floor and pulled her stretch pants down to her knees.

"Oh my, we've made a mistake," seemed to be the consensus, followed by, "Let's get the fuck outa here," as Ruth, released, jumped up and started throwing every ball she could get her hands on, overhand, at that crowd of nasty, mean-spirited old bitches.

RUTH AND ELLIS: NEW ORLEANS

Ruth and Ellis ate dinner at one of the snooty expensive restaurants in the French Quarter, and Ruth's hairdo, a big crisp bouffant, hair sprayed to the consistency of cotton candy, caught fire when the flames from their dessert (ignited a little too close to the table) leaped from the Bananas Foster to her head. Ellis threw the table cloth over her and smothered the inferno before she was hurt, but her coiffure, of course, was a mess, a smoldering, shedding crew cut. "Let me go to the ladies' room and see what I can do with it," she said. "Right," said Ellis, "I'll meet you outside." Ruth smoked into the rest room, setting off another fire alarm, and Ellis sauntered out to the street with a toothpick in his mouth, loosening his belt a notch.

A barker for a girlie show shouted from up on Bourbon Street, saying they had the sweetest little girls in New

Orleans inside. So Ellis went, like a fly to honey. But the girls were transvestites. He figured it out after he arm wrestled his waitress for his drink and lost, lost bad, getting thrown off his barstool. So he grabbed his drink and left, meeting up with Ruth outside the door.

"What were you doing in there?" she asked.

"He told her, 'Nothin'. They're all guys.'"

The barker saw Ruth's crew cut and evening gown and offered her a job. She decked him and stepped inside, where she purchased a wig (loose blonde ringlets) right off the head of the bartender, Camille (Carl). When she pushed through the curtains back onto Bourbon Street, Ellis wolf-whistled and yelled, "OOEE! HEY BABY!" Then he realized it was Ruth and he shut up.

RUTH'S MOM'S HEAD

Ruth and Ellis had been counting on a little inheritance when Ruth's mom died. The old lady wasn't rich, but she had life insurance and a little two-bedroom 1950-built stucco house two blocks east of the old Coast Route, paid for free and clear. But when Mom got the cancer, she made other plans for her money, and made them legally, changing her will to switch beneficiaries: her daughter and lowlife son-in-law would get nothing, and the Loma Alta Life Extension Foundation would get everything else.

The Foundation would, for an initial thirty-five thousand dollars, remove Mom's head from her dead but still fresh body and cryogenically suspend (freeze) it. The remainder of the money from her estate would pay for the year-to-year upkeep and rent on her shiny metal, super-cold neurocan, where she would wait indefinitely for modern medicine to — whenever it was ready — supply her with a new young body: preferably one, as dictated by her will, that would make men twist their heads and howl, "HUBBA HUBBA!" Of course, these future wolves would suck those hubba hubbas right back in when they caught sight of the gargoyle head riding atop that voluptuous twenty-first century sexpot, but Mom, crazy from the chemo, hadn't thought about that.

The weather was miserable the day of Mom's funeral, with a stinging cold wind pushing black clouds in off the ocean. Icy, scattered raindrops the size of marbles bombarded the mourners, exploding on the priest's bald head and the plain pine coffin and the folding metal chairs. When the eulogy was over and the box with Mom's headless body was being lowered into its hole, Ruth raised her head and wailed, "MOMMA, MOMMA, MOMMA!" As the men pulled her away, the